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Building Bridges: Volunteers in WIC and CSFP



Building Bridges: Volunteers in WIC and CSFP*

Volunteers in WIC and CSFP? Yes! Many State and local agencies have already discovered the advantages of using volunteers in WIC and CSFP. Voluntarism can stretch resources, lower administrative costs, help you use professional time more effectively, and increase the quantity and quality of services to participants. Volunteers can be bridges between the community and WIC or CSFP; in fact, community support can be crucial to the success of a program. The experience can be a rewarding one to the volunteer, not only for the inner satisfaction but also possible exposure to new tasks and experiences leading to career reentry. This brochure offers some basic guidance to State and local agencies in setting up a volunteer program.

Analyzing Your Needs

It is important to know why you want the volunteers, what you want the volunteers to do, and when you want the work done. The initial step is to assess your needs. What unfilled, or partially filled, needs exist in your agency? How can these best be met? What type of volunteers do you

* Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children; Commodity Supplemental Food Program. These programs are administered by the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

need--professionals, experienced clericals, or those with other skills? You will recruit more volunteers when both you and they believe they can meet your specific needs.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to using volunteers and you should carefully consider these pros and cons in your planning. Disadvantages may include problems with turnover, accountability, costs, and space. However, volunteers can substantially enhance program operations through their own knowledge and expertise and can free up staff and resources for other necessary tasks. Volunteers can be more than just another pair of hands. They can be highly skilled, highly motivated members of your team in providing services to WIC or CSFP participants.

Locating Volunteers

Many people have skills, knowledge, or time to share and would like to be involved in community work and perform some useful service. And, some people or organizations that cannot devote time may be willing to share or donate other resources, such as free media coverage, no-cost nutrition education materials, gratis printing, or money. Look for community support from:

Hospitals and Medical/Health Associations - Many hospitals that rely on volunteers to perform a variety of services maintain a list of available

volunteers. These hospitals may be willing to share their lists or sources. Also, medical associations for physicians, nurses, and health professionals may be sources of volunteers.

Universities and High Schools - Both high-school and college-level students may be willing to devote time to doing research, giving classes, or simply being involved in the programs. State or local agencies may find it valuable to ask local colleges and universities if students in health, nutrition, or other professional programs could perform volunteer work for WIC or CSFP for college credit. An ongoing relationship with a college could be established so that students could offer their services for WIC or CSFP each semester. The college, the students, the agency, and the participants might all benefit from such an arrangement. High schools with technical training classes might also be good sources of volunteers, again possibly for school credit.

Community Organizations/Businesses - Most communities have youth, church, or social service groups that are active in charitable activities. Examples include the Jaycees, Knights of Columbus, and the Lions Club. Local businesses often donate materials, money, or services to assist the programs.

News Media - Public announcements and notices posted in appropriate locations are excellent means of recruiting volunteers. Public

announcements may include radio and television spots, journal and community newspaper articles, and advertisements.

Professionals - Attorneys, medical and health professionals, food dealers, and business persons can provide skilled professional volunteer services and advice.

Program Participants - Current or former WIC or CSFP participants may be valuable volunteer workers. Clients may feel more comfortable with, and more easily relate to, volunteers who have actually participated in WIC or CSFP. Participant volunteers, often neighbors of the people they serve, can extend a lot of good will, understanding, and openness to other participants.

Using Volunteers

A successful volunteer program requires careful planning and management, and you must be prepared to offer time, commitment, and coordination. In return for this commitment, volunteers can help accomplish program goals in ways not currently possible through your paid staff and other administrative resources.

Volunteers can be invaluable in the following areas. This list is by no means complete; nor will these ideas work in all agencies. But they may spark ideas for creative, valuable volunteer service in your agency.

Nutrition Education - Nutritionists, dietitians, nurses, and other professionals can be invaluable in helping to develop and teach nutrition education. Other volunteers can contribute talents for artwork and design, do research, or help to duplicate and distribute materials. Local presses might be persuaded to offer printing free or at a reduced price. Volunteers who have been trained as nutrition aides might teach basic nutrition education following lesson plans prepared by themselves or by professional staff; volunteers might also conduct cooking demonstrations. Of course, all materials and plans developed by volunteers must be reviewed and approved by the appropriate agency staff members.

Nutrition education is the area in which colleges and universities may be most willing or able to give course credits to students who volunteer. In addition to other types of help in nutrition education, students may be able to conduct evaluations. Besides possibly fulfilling course requirements, such evaluations can help your agency assess and improve its nutrition education.

Transportation - Many participants in rural areas have no means of transportation, and many in urban areas cannot afford the available public transportation. Furthermore, it is difficult to carry bags or boxes of supplemental foods home via public transportation. Therefore, transporting participants to and from the local agency or food pickup point may be one of your most satisfying uses of volunteers.

A word of caution: Before letting volunteers transport participants, check the law in your area. Would the volunteer or your agency be liable in case of an accident? What type of insurance coverage is required? Any liability should be clarified with the volunteer in writing. Also, volunteers should be made aware that they would be responsible for the costs of transportation. It may be feasible for volunteers to coordinate participant carpools.

Food Delivery - In direct distribution systems, volunteers might be involved in the warehouse, handling or issuing food. They could be responsible for taking inventory and completing inventory records for local agency staff. In retail delivery systems, they could check prices and availability of supplemental foods at retail stores. Volunteers who are skilled teachers or public speakers could conduct or help with training sessions for retail vendors.

Translation - Many WIC and CSFP agencies have a sizable number of applicants and participants who cannot speak English or have difficulty communicating in English. Bilingual volunteers can be especially useful in interpreting for them. These volunteers might also develop or translate written materials. Your State or local agency could, in this way, use the services of bilingual volunteers who are unable to come to the agency site.

Certification - Certifying WIC and CSFP participants may involve a variety of tasks other than determining eligibility, which must be done by staff professionals. For example, the process can include dietary histories, blood tests, height/weight measurements, and discussions with participants regarding the purpose of the program, participant responsibilities, and the mechanics of participation. Many of these health- and nutrition-related activities can be handled by volunteer nutrition students or public health nurses. Volunteers can also make appointments and help manage a local agency's waiting list. If your volunteers are coordinating participant carpools, they will be able to schedule appointments around transportation arrangements and vice versa.

Confidentiality of participant records must be carefully maintained; again, the responsibility for determination of eligibility remains with local agency staff. Nevertheless, your volunteers can relieve staff of a number of steps in the certification process in a highly professional manner, while establishing a good rapport for your agency with the participant.

Other Tasks for Volunteers - Professional and nonprofessional volunteers from the community can:

- Provide child care

- Telephone participants who fail to keep appointments
- Write newsletters
- Decorate or repair offices and clinics
- Make community presentations
- Talk with participants about topics of interest, such as breastfeeding, home gardening, or food preparation
- Help participants with required paperwork in order to streamline local agency procedures
- Help participants who are shopping with WIC vouchers for the first time
- Prepare demonstrations of WIC/CSFP foods
- Conduct prenatal classes
- Help with general clerical duties.

Training Volunteers

Careful planning leads to successful training. The development of any training is a continuous process of analyzing the problems, defining the goals, selecting and trying out teaching methods, and evaluating and revising these methods. The results of the fourth phase--evaluation--should tell the supervisor if the objectives have been met, if any problems have been solved, and if there are other areas in which training or supervision is needed.

Your agency will be able to more effectively train, assign, supervise, and evaluate volunteers if you develop job descriptions for them. These descriptions should include any minimum qualifications and a brief description of anticipated duties. When preparing job descriptions, consider the amount of time volunteers may have available and the professional expertise they might have. This approach will legitimize the volunteer as a member of your agency team, which in turn facilitates increased commitment from the volunteer. It also provides a mechanism for screening, selecting, supervising, and evaluating. Your job descriptions do not need to be all-encompassing, nor should they be for one-time assignments.

Actively involving volunteers through on-the-job training and workshops may be your most effective way to train them. In setting up a training program, consider the following:

Orientation - Volunteers will feel more involved in the program and understand their roles better if they are introduced to key personnel in the agency and are told how roles of key personnel fit into the organization. Volunteers will also benefit from a thorough orientation in office and clinic procedures, expected behavior, tasks to be performed, and how their "job" relates to others. Volunteers should tactfully be made aware that your agency has the option to dismiss them if reasonable expectations are not met.

Workshops - These can be effective in training a group of volunteers. Workshops can cover basic orientation, the roles of volunteers, nutrition information, and other topics of interest. Workshops can also be a good tool for periodically updating volunteers or offering more indepth nutrition education training. Case studies and roleplaying sessions may be effective training tools. Depending on the content and speakers, workshops may also serve as inservice training for professionals or as a basic requirement for college credit for student volunteers.

Related Training - Volunteers might be encouraged to visit public libraries or attend seminars or meetings of professional organizations or other sources to increase their nutrition knowledge and understanding of the purpose of WIC and CSFP. Volunteers who go this "extra step" may be more enthusiastic and committed to fulfilling their roles.

Staff Meetings - You may want to have one or more volunteers sit in on staff meetings. This can benefit both the agency and the volunteer by opening up lines of communication and generating creative approaches to problems in providing benefits to participants. Among your volunteers may be professionals who can present updated health or nutrition information to your agency staff.

Your training time and expenses are allowable administrative costs, just as for agency staff. The ultimate goal of training for volunteers is to improve program operations and services to participants, so in the long run your time and dollars will be well spent. Remember, however, it is prudent to ensure that costs expended on preparing volunteers do not exceed the derived benefits.

Supervising Volunteers

Volunteers should be supervised like all other staff members. Whether it is done formally or informally, evaluating a volunteer's performance should be a major responsibility of the supervisor. It is also very important to express encouragement and appreciation to the volunteer. Informal supervision may be more appropriate for your professional volunteers. In fact, "supervision" may not be the appropriate term for your working relationship with some of your volunteers. For instance, if a pediatrician or practicing nutritionist volunteers time occasionally to discuss infant feeding with your pregnant participants, these volunteers

are not supervised. But, it is still important to ensure that your agency's needs, your participants' needs, and the volunteers' needs are being met.

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) of the Department of Agriculture has identified several principles for more formal supervision. These are:

- Clear understanding of expectations
- Specific work guidance
- Recognition of good work
- Constructive criticism of poor work
- Opportunity to demonstrate potential for greater responsibility
- Encouragement for self-improvement.

Carefully observing a volunteer during training and job performance allows you to pinpoint strong and weak areas in your volunteer program. You can then immediately reinforce the program or change it.

Other Organizations to Contact

A number of organizations and agencies have successfully used volunteers. You may wish to contact the following:

Focus:HOPE (A major CSFP local agency) - The Volunteer Department of Focus:HOPE is responsible for coordinating the active involvement of over 22,000 volunteers and supporters. Many hours of vital service are performed each month by volunteers who provide transportation, teach, work on the monthly newsletter, unload box cars, write computer programs, make phone calls, and perform many other valuable services. The address for Focus:HOPE is:

Focus:HOPE
1355 Oakman Boulevard
Detroit, Michigan 48238
(313) 883-7440

American Red Cross - The American Red Cross has used volunteers extensively for many years. There are 3,000 chapters across the country. For further information on their volunteer activities, contact your local chapter.

March of Dimes - The March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation uses 27,000 volunteers nationwide. To discuss the many different ways they

use their volunteers, contact either your local chapter or the national office for volunteer programs:

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
Volunteer Department
1275 Mamaroneck Drive
White Plains, New York 10605
(914) 428-7100

Suggested Reading

Planning

Moore, N.A. "The Application of Cost-Benefit Analysis to Volunteer Programs." Volunteer Administration, Vol. XI, No. 1, pp. 13-21.

Available from: Association for Volunteer Administration
P.O. Box 4584
Boulder, Colorado 80306
(303) 497-0238
Cost: \$3.00

Naylar, H.H. Leadership for Volunteering. New York: Dryden Associates, 1976. Out of print; check public libraries.

Schlindler-Raiman, E. and Lippitt, R. The Volunteer Community: Creative Use of Human Resources, Second Edition. San Diego: University Associates, 1977.

Available from: University Associates
P.O. Box 26240
San Diego, California 92126
(619) 578-5900
Cost: \$9.50

The Volunteer Skillsbank. An Innovative Way to Connect Individual Talents to Community Needs. Boulder: National Center for Citizen Involvement, 1980.

Available from: National Center for Citizen Involvement
P.O. Box 1807
Boulder, Colorado 80306
(303) 447-0492
Cost: \$9.75 plus \$2.25 postage

Wilson, M. The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs. Boulder: National Center for Citizen Involvement, 1976.

Available from: See above
Cost: \$7.35 plus \$2.25 postage

Synergist: Index 1971-1982. National Center for Service-Learning, ACTION.

Planning by Objectives: A Manual for Student Community Service Program Coordinators. National Center for Service-Learning, ACTION Pamphlet No. 4000.15.

Available from: ACTION
National Center for Service-Learning
806 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20525
(202) 254-5195
Cost: One copy free

Students as Volunteers

Training Student Volunteers. National Center for Service-Learning,
ACTION Training Manual 4000.1.

Available from: ACTION
National Center for Service-Learning
806 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20525
(202) 254-5195
Cost: One copy free

Fundraising

Flanagan, J. "The Grass Roots Fundraising Book: How to Raise Money
in Your Community." Chicago: Swallow Press, 1977.

Available from: Youth Project
1555 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 483-1430
Cost: \$8.75 prepaid

Tenbrunsel, T.W. "Non-Profit Organizations, Recession, Volunteers and Fundraising." Volunteer Administration, Vol. XIII, No. 4, pp. 1-3.

Available from: Association for Volunteer Administration
P.O. Box 4584
Boulder, Colorado 80306
(303) 497-0238
Cost: \$3.00

The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program are open to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, sex, national origin, age, or handicap. If you believe anyone has been discriminated against for those reasons in the WIC or CSF Program, write immediately to the Secretary of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.



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